



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing
Women's Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom

March 8, 2022

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and thank you for attending this morning's hearing hosted by U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. In honor of International Women's Day, today's hearing will focus on *Women's Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom*. I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

USCIRF is one of many organizations working around the world to advance religious freedom abroad. We are joined by government and nongovernment partners across the globe who share our commitment to protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief, or FoRB, for all. Often under-heralded are the women doing this work, day-in and day-out, fighting to protect FoRB in their communities and for all people, around the world. Today, we will recognize some of these women and learn how they have fought and continue to fight to protect FoRB rights and promote religious freedom norms. Through these stories and analyses, we will reveal how the U.S. government and its partners can best support religious freedom efforts led by women and fight religious freedom violations on the basis of gender.

In 2017, USCIRF published a landmark report on the synergies between the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to women's equality. This research highlighted the urgent need to better understand the unique harmful practices that women suffer because of their religion or belief while also acknowledging that these two rights are not clashing, and, in fact, are indivisible and interrelated. Protection of the right under international law to freedom of religion or belief greatly benefits women and women's rights worldwide. From respecting a woman's right to practice her faith free from legal guardianship restrictions in Saudi Arabia to protecting Uyghur, Rohingya, and Yazidi women targeted with torture and sexual violence because of their ethnoreligious identities in China, Burma, Iraq, and Syria respectively, protecting freedom of religion or belief has significant positive impacts on the lives of women around the world.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that wherever we see religious freedom violations we also see women taking up the mantle to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief and advocate on behalf of those most vulnerable to religious violence and oppression. From working to repeal blasphemy laws to fostering interfaith tolerance, women are often on the front lines of the fight to protect and advance religious freedom worldwide. Today, we center some examples of their stories, not only to confer upon them much deserved recognition and gratitude, but also to

uncover what we can learn from their successes and setbacks and how we can better support their efforts in the future.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair Turkel to discuss in more detail some of the ways in which women have worked to advance religious freedom worldwide.